

the beginning of

THE STRONGEST (from **FEMALE PERSUASION**)

a play by Rich Orloff

adapted from the short play
"The Stronger" by August Strindberg

Time: Early evening, Valentine's Day

Place: A stylish bar in the city

Characters: HARRIET, married, 40's – 50's

LAURA, unmarried, 20's – 30's

WAITRESS, marital status unknown, 20's – 30's

HARRIET and LAURA sit at a table in a stylish bar in the city.
They have both been served martinis.

HARRIET

(a bit condescending,
or perhaps that's just her style:)

I'm glad we can approach this as adults.

(sips, then:)

To be honest, I was afraid you wouldn't show
up. I apologize for underestimating you.

Laura sips her martini.

HARRIET (cont'd)

Do you like your Ketel One martini? I'm
always amused when someone insists on
a certain kind of vodka in their martini.
Would you really notice if they'd used
Absolut or Stolli or even Smirnoff? Not that
I'm judging; I'm just, well, I've heard so
many younger people insist on a specific
brand of vodka that I've begun to think
they get much more pleasure thinking
they have taste than they actually *notice*
taste. Of course, you may be different.

Harriet sips her martini.

HARRIET (cont'd)

Ahh. Gin. The way martinis were designed. It is, you know. It used to be that if you wanted a vodka martini – and nobody did – you had to order “a vodka martini”. Poor underappreciated gin. It has bite, it has strength, unlike flavorless vodka. One day some rapper or someone will order a gin martini, and it will become *trendy*, as if it’s new. But very few things are actually new, even if we like to think we’ve made them so.

(sips, then:)

Gin and vermouth were made for each other. But the way things are intended – I guess that concept’s become passé. So what are your plans for tonight, huh, after our little tête à tête? When I was your age, and trust me I was, if I had dinner alone on Valentine’s Day, or with other... untethered women, well, I’d say, “It’s just another night”. The things we tell ourselves. I have this cousin, and when she got married, on their wedding night, after their *very* swanky party ended, they invited a half-dozen friends over to the swanky hotel suite her parents paid for, and they all sat around smoking pot. When I found out, I was shocked, but my cousin said, “It’s just another night. We don’t believe in marriage. We just wanted our parents to shut up.” Well, I guess they really didn’t believe in marriage because two years later, they split up. My husband and I didn’t share our honeymoon night with anyone.

(sips, then:)

Last time I saw my cousin, her boobs were much perkier than they used to be. But the rest of her... sagged. Sometimes I think gays have it backwards. They want the right to get married. I think straight people need commitment ceremonies. I hope I, I don’t sound prudish. Trust me, everything I believe I’ve learned from experience.

Harriet sips her drink. She looks at Laura, who sips her drink.

HARRIET (cont'd)

(with a simmering threat:)

Speaking of rage, guess what I got on the way over here?

Harriet places her purse on the table. For a moment, Harriet and Laura look at each other. Harriet takes a video game cartridge out of her purse.

HARRIET (cont'd)

(shifting mood:)

It's that new video game that everyone's crazy about. Our son's been pleading for it. "Can't I have it, Mommy, please, Mommy, *pleeeeeeeze?*" You know, some people say games like this promote violent impulses. *I* think having some violent impulses is a useful survival tool.

So how's the job hunt going? I suspect you got a decent severance package. I know it's a hard time to be unemployed. It's almost impossible these days to prove you're *needed*. But I'm sure you'll land somewhere. I bet you're great at landing. You should list it under "special skills".

Harriet gets the attention of an unseen waitress.

HARRIET (cont'd)

Could I have another?

(to Laura:)

Would you like another? My treat. Or can't you hold your liquor either? At some point, you may want to apologize for underestimating *me*.

Harriet puts the video game cartridge back in her bag.

HARRIET (cont'd)

I got something for my husband, too. Something I think every man who works late at the office deserves.

She takes out two plane tickets.

HARRIET (cont'd)

(shifting mood:)

Two tickets to St. Croix. Ever been? It's beautiful. Especially this time of year. Soft tropical breezes... endless white sands... various other clichés which have withstood the test of time. When you're there, any problem you once had becomes, well, past tense. You get wayyy past tense because being tense isn't worth it.

The WAITRESS enters and serves Harriet her martini.

HARRIET (cont'd)

Gin, right?

The waitress nods.

HARRIET (cont'd)

Stirred, not shaken?

The waitress nods.

HARRIET (cont'd)

Perfect.

Harriet looks at Laura. As Harriet continues, the waitress takes the empty martini glass and exits.

HARRIET (cont'd)

Despite the Bond films, this is how martinis are intended to be. Stirred... but not the least bit shaken.

(sips, then:)

What the hell do men see in women like you, anyway? It's not like you're a great conversationalist. And I'm not too certain you're too good a listener, either. Do you think men are actually attracted to you, or do you think you just symbolize something to them? Something... something *easier* than intimacy. It's good you don't have children. You're not ready to grow up.

Intimacy, true commitment, takes more hard work than you'll ever be capable of. But at the end of the day – hell, you don't care about the end of my day, do you? Or the end of my son's day? Or the end of my husband's, either, do you? You wouldn't know love if it jumped on you and bit you on the ass. You wouldn't know love if it set up shop in your beaver and gave you ten per cent of the profits. You wouldn't know love if it covered you with shit and flushed you down the toilet.

(starting to crumble:)

You wouldn't know love if, if, if, if...

Harriet takes the olive out of her martini and swallows it.

HARRIET (cont'd)

Women like you, *if* you don't end up alone, *if* you ever reach the age where you need to develop some *substance*, *if* you finally end up with a man who doesn't just view you as *a vacation spot*, well, this may not happen to you, but I've seen it happen to women *like* you: Every time they see the man they're with even *glance* at another woman, well, just imagine what goes through their heads. Their complete distrust of the man, because they know what it took to get him. Their complete distrust of other women, too, because... It must be hell going through the day assuming that all other women are either as untrustworthy as you are, or saps.

(sips, becomes bright
and seemingly untroubled:)

Anyway, life's too short to bear a grudge.
What I really want to say is... Thank you.

Laura chuckles.

HARRIET (cont'd)

I mean that. You have strengthened our marriage. You've shown me I'm stronger than I thought. He's shown he can admit mistakes and atone for them. And if I've had to lose a little weight and dress a little more provocatively, if I've had to learn a few new skills, well, neither of us are complaining. He's developed a few new skills himself. Deep down, I think he's a good man. Not a perfect one. But what is marriage about if not forgiveness?